



Reading Melissa Harris-Lacewell "Beware the crabs in the sand"

One of the highlights of the Annual General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association is the Ware Lecture, named for Harriet E. Ware of Milton, MA, who bequeathed \$5,000 to the American Unitarian Association back in 1920. Since then, the Ware Lecture has become a barometre of our times. Speakers have included Martin Luther King Jr., Kurt Vonnegut, Holly Near, Jesse Jackson, and this year, Melissa Harris-Lacewell, Associate Professor of Politics and African American Studies at Princeton University. She is frequently a guest on the Keith Olbermann and Rachel Maddow shows, identified as a specialist in race and politics in America. She is also a Unitarian Universalist and preparing for ordained ministry. Our reading today is an excerpt of her lecture:

"[This] is how I found myself on a Tuesday afternoon - standing in the cold Atlantic Ocean, nearly up to my chin in salt water. I turned away from the beach, faced the horizon, and took in the enormity of the sky and water. It felt like such a perfect Unitarian Universalist experience. Standing in the ocean I felt our transcendentalist forefathers whisper to me. I was taking in the wholeness of nature, recognizing and even reveling in the smallness of myself.

... The clouds broke and I saw the sun sending rays onto the water. It glistened like jewels. So as not to fall I dug my toes deep into the ocean floor...

...And then a crab pinched my toe... Hard.

That too was a perfect Unitarian Universalist metaphor. Just as I was floating off into an ecstatic spiritual experience I was reminded, quite literally, of the gnawing realities on the ground. And that is where I would like to spend a little time with you: right in the tension between soaring expectations, ecstatic faithful assurance of something larger, and the biting, stinging, difficult realities that ground our lives and work.

Faith and Reason: this is the juncture that marks our religious community as Unitarian Universalists and as citizens in a deeply flawed democratic Republic."

We need both faith and reason to work toward a more just world. Sometimes UUs are too willing to relinquish the power of faith in the pursuit of cool rationality. We are a people held together most profoundly by a shared commitment to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Many of us come to Unitarian Universalism from religious traditions that we felt encouraged blind faith and asked us to leave reason at the door of the church. So we cling to our rationality the marker of our religious identity. We refused to be duped by faith; we look for evidence!



But I want to ask us to embrace both. We need our arms flung wide to the sky embracing the whole earth with reverence and hope, and we also need enough sense to remember that crabs are in the sand beneath our feet.

Let us enter into a time of silence.

Sermon

When I was a preschooler, I was obsessed with the Family Bible. We had this heavy Bible that sat on the buffet in the dining room, and even though I couldn't read, I was fascinated with it. I had learned from the adults in my life, even without them telling me, that this heavy black book contained "The Truth" and that having faith was about believing in that truth. And I'll be honest with you, I was in love with that truth even though I didn't know what it was. I experienced great security simply knowing it was there. So I would drag that heavy Bible off the buffet and sit in the living room with it opened on my lap, and run my little fingers over words I couldn't read, touching the Truth and believing in it. That was what having faith was about. Even though you couldn't see and couldn't understand, at least you could believe.

But I'm not four anymore. And faith couldn't stay what it was when I was in that innocent trusting time of life. It had to change. And yet for many of us, we grew up in religious systems or cultures where we were expected to stay in that place, and we couldn't. And that, for many of us, is what led to our decision to leave the churches we grew up in, and what has brought many of you into Unitarian Universalism. This is why faith is a hard word for many of us to deal with, because of that experience of being expected to believe, without question, things we couldn't believe in.

When you ask most people what faith is, they will say something that amounts to this: Faith is believing in the right things, even if you can't see or understand them. Faith means believing in God, or believing in the right things about God. When someone asks you, for instance, "Do you believe in heaven and hell?" or "Do you believe in the Bible?" they're coming from this understanding of faith as right belief.

Having faith has also come to mean believing in things that are downright awkward. Like, believing that the earth was created in seven days, or believing in the virgin birth or believing that the bread and wine literally turn into the body and blood of Christ. Having faith has also come to mean that when something horrible happens, we're supposed to believe that "It's all part of God's plan." How can genocide or child abuse, global warming, or millions without health insurance be part of God's plan?

You know, it was absolutely appropriate for me as a 4 year old to experience truth as a large book I couldn't understand but could touch. That's what four year olds need. But we don't stay four, and faith can't stay in that place. Otherwise, it becomes dysfunctional. It becomes a way to make people feel guilty for using their minds, to feel guilty for having different thoughts, to feel that they can never be



good enough, be faithful enough. Father Thomas Merton, a Catholic Priest and contemplative has come to believe that this kind of faith is a violence to reality. Not only it is unreal, it is supremely selfish and self absorbed because we're actually trying to bend reality to our own inner fantasies. Not unlike that little boy in the bathtub, who in his desire for cleanliness flooded the whole town, that's what an unhealthy faith does. It hurts everyone around you and it blinds you to reality. And if you can't see that, you're as oblivious as the little boy who goes to bed thinking everything is fine.

For some people, this popular understanding of faith as right belief has so damaged them that they have felt that we should just give the word up altogether. It is unredeemable. But others, and I include myself in this, feel differently. My approach is that you don't abandon powerful tools of the spirit because some are misusing them. You take them back and peel off the layers of injustice done to them and in the process you heal yourself. In fact, that's what Unitarian Universalism has been about from the beginning. Universalists liberated the concept of heaven and hell from something that exists in an afterlife to metaphors for human existence in this life. We create our own heavens and hells right here so there's no use in being frightened of an unforeseeable eternal future. We need to free the world and ourselves from the hells that are right down here. Unitarians liberated Christianity itself from the belief that humanity is depraved and sinful. Jesus came not to save us from a sinful nature. He came to show us how to access the god-given goodness in us so that we are not enslaved to our potential for evil.

Unitarian Universalism is primarily about liberation. It is about throwing off the chains of all the ways we are enslaved from within and without so that we are freed to be conduits of the divine, to be servants of the world. And that means that our understanding of faith is transformed from simple belief into a force for change, a force for good, a force for freedom and liberation. Marilyn Sewell, a Unitarian Universalist minister, once wrote that Unitarian Universalists, like all people, "want a faith that holds us steady, that gives us resilience, and that offers hope. But [our] faith cannot be one that we simply adopt wholesale. When life puts us in the trenches, in those places where we feel helpless and hopeless, we need a faith that is our own, that is congruent with whom we are, that reflects our own true beliefs and values."

What this means, is that faithfulness for us is about being loyal to the beliefs and values that we have discerned are true. This means that there is both great freedom and great responsibility in being Unitarian Universalist. You can't simply believe what you want to believe, or believe what is easiest to believe. As Unitarian Universalists we go through a lifetime of discernment regarding our beliefs and values because we expect them to change and expect ourselves to change because the act of living itself continually reveals truths that we could not see before..

But it's more than this. The biggest problem with the idea of faith only as belief is that it stays in our heads and in our hearts. It actually takes us away from the world. Unitarian Universalism is a religion that focuses on the here and now. Our faith is not only about figuring out what we believe, or finding



hope for ourselves, peace for ourselves, steadfastness for ourselves. Then we are as self-absorbed as that little boy in the bathtub. As people of a free faith, our lives and our beliefs and our values do not belong to us anymore. We are the servants of the world. To use the words of our reading, we need to be both in the ecstasy of the moment, and be attentive to the crabs biting our feet. If we wish to be faithful, we need to hear the call of the world and what it is asking of us.

One of the things I've learned about this particular church, and I've been here four years now. Can you believe that? We're starting our fifth year together. Since I got here, one of the greatest dissatisfactions I've heard expressed is that we do not do enough beyond our four walls. We have a very small presence in our community. Most people in West County and St. Charles County, which is where most of you come from, don't even know we exist. Our social justice ministry basically consists of the wheelbarrow in the vestibule for Circle of Concern, and splitting our collection plate. Not that these aren't important, but these are low commitment activities. Just last January, we completed a evaluation of the ministry of the church as a whole. And one thing that came up over and over again, is that we weren't extending ourselves out enough. More of you complained about that than anything else. And what this says to me is that we are strongly attuned to a concept of faith that moves beyond belief. Faith is about how you live your values, and there is a deep sense of awareness here, at least in those who completed the evaluation, that in some ways, we're falling short of being faithful to what it means to live our Unitarian Universalist values.

This not to say we've accomplished nothing. One year we sent 27 people to New Orleans to help in the rebuilding, and that was a great accomplishment. Another year we did a play and all proceeds went to a battered women's shelter. These are good things, but the leadership needed to sustain this kind of wonderful stuff did not emerge. Last year one of our newer members started a Community Services Task Force and could not get it off the ground for lack of commitment. It just fizzled away.

So there's this disconnect here – between the stated desire to be liberal religious presence living our values and serving our community and the reality that it's been very difficult for our actions to match our words.

Now being the person I am, I have been very tempted and at times have tried to fix it. And I've come to the realization that this is not actually what you need me to do because no one can fix this for you except you. And actually, it's not my job to fix it. My job is to speak the truth as I see it and then offer my support and guidance as you find your way. I'm always looking to see who might emerge, who might find it in their hearts to lead the way. Right now, for instance, I'm hoping that we can get an annual Habitat for Humanity weekend as the one big thing we do every year. Many of you have mentioned it. So I'm waiting to see when the spark is actually going to grow into a flame, and then I'll be right there with you helping to make it happen. You see, in Unitarian Universalism, the minister does not single handedly run the church because it does not belong to us. It's not the way we believe things should be



done because you are not sheep to be led. Heaven help any UU minister who tries to lead a church that way! So I can't be the one to save you from the disconnect between the faith this church professes and the faithfulness this church practices.

And I know what the fears are. The fear is that this is a small church with so much do right here, that it would drain itself if it also worked to serve the world. And I'm telling you that's a false dichotomy. If you want to grow, if you want to be a vital congregation, if you want to reverse the cuts we've made as a result of the recession, then we need to resist the temptation to pull in, to isolate. If we do that, we too will be like that little boy in the bathtub working so hard to get clean, while the world around him floods through his inattention.

This is as true for us as individuals as it is for a church. The way to become whole, the way to be a faith-filled person is to look outwards, to not just have beliefs, but to live them. And no one can do that for you except you.

If there is one awkward thing Unitarian Universalists have had faith in since the beginning, is that humanity as a whole has the potential to live in peace and in right relationship. That the human race as a whole has the ability to heal this world. And when I say this is an awkward kind of faith, a hard to believe in kind of faith, it's because it is so much easier to look at the world and all its problems, and to feel despair at the enormity of those problems. How can we proclaim the goodness in every human being when the world is filled with suffering caused by human beings? There are so many examples of how we fail each other, fail God. It is indeed a radical thing to believe in justice, far more radical than what kind of God exists out there and whether the sacraments actually turn into body and blood. This justice-focused faith that is the real deal and calls us to a faithfulness that should make us a bit awkward and stretched. Being a little uncomfortable for the right reasons never hurt anyone.

So let's imagine that we've pulled the family bible off the buffet, and we're the ones sitting in the living room running our fingers over the words. What should those words say? What should they be asking of us? What kind of faithfulness are they calling you to? And do you have the courage to move forward, even though you may not always understand everything there is to understand. We're just going to have to live our way into the truth. That's what it means to have faith.

May the blessings of the spirit of life in its known and unknown manifestations be with you as we live into the truths that are waiting for each of us.

Amen and blessed be.